

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

December 7, 2023

The Honorable Ron DeSantis  
Office of the Governor  
State of Florida, The Capitol  
400 S. Monroe Street  
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0001

Dear Governor DeSantis:

We write to share our grave concern regarding the sharp uptick of banned and challenged books across the state of Florida, and the alarming hostility of your administration toward schools, libraries and the professionals who operate them for our constituents. These combined actions, if left unchecked, will foment a noxious climate of repression and marginalization that degrades learning, understanding and undermines all Floridians' basic freedoms.

The American Library Association recently reported that 2,571 unique titles were banned or challenged last year in the United States, marking a 40 percent increase from 2021.<sup>1</sup> Even more worrisome is the targeted attack on stories written by and about people of color and LGBTQI+ individuals, with 30 percent of book bans last school year featuring stories about race and 26 percent of stories featuring LGBTQI+ themes.<sup>2</sup> As a result of your signing House Bills 1467 and 1069 into law, Florida is now the national leader in banned books.<sup>3</sup> Given that reality, and combined with your administration's recent decision to cut ties with the American Library Association<sup>4</sup>, ***we strongly urge you to end this campaign of censorship in schools and substantively engage with educators, librarians, and parents to protect our students' rights to an inclusive, comprehensive education.***

The censorship of books not only poses a threat to our children's well-rounded quality education, but it also infringes on their First Amendment rights. In *Board of Education v. Pico*, a case in which New York school board members attempted to strip books such as *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut Jr. from the Island Trees Union Free School District, the Supreme Court reaffirmed that "First Amendment rights, applied in the light of the special characteristics of the school environment, are available to... students."<sup>5</sup> The Court also opined that the First Amendment may "impose... limitations upon a local school board's exercise of its discretion to remove books from high school and junior high school libraries,"<sup>6</sup> and suggested that books may not be removed from school libraries simply because a school board disagrees with its content. Despite these considerations, you have signed legislation and enabled local efforts to censor an

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2023/04/24/1171570138/number-of-books-banned-or-challenged-up-in-2022-ala>

<sup>2</sup> <https://pen.org/report/banned-in-the-usa-state-laws-supercharge-book-suppression-in-schools/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.tampabay.com/opinion/2023/09/22/florida-book-bans-texas-desantis-moms-for-liberty-pinellas/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.pnj.com/story/news/2023/11/02/florida-cut-ties-with-american-library-association-what-that-means/71421944007/>

<sup>5</sup> *Island Trees Sch. Dist. v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982)

<sup>6</sup> *Island Trees Sch. Dist. v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982)

unprecedented number of books, leaving schools with fewer resources that are less reflective of our communities.

As you are likely aware, the banning of books that feature LGBTQI+ characters, themes, and stories deprives students of essential learning opportunities, denies them access to diverse perspectives, and fosters a culture of discrimination and exclusion. Indeed, legislative attacks against this community have proven to be devastating to the educational success and mental health of our LGBTQI+ youth. As part of their 2023 survey, The Trevor Project reported that nearly two in three LGBTQI+ young people said that hearing about potential laws banning discussions of LGBTQI+ individuals at school made their mental health “a lot worse.”<sup>7</sup> In the 2021 GLSEN National School Climate Survey, nearly 70 percent of LGBTQI+ youth felt unsafe in their school environment, with almost one in three LGBTQI+ students missing at least one day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.<sup>8</sup> Just last year, The Trevor Project also found that 45 percent of LGBTQI+ youth in Florida seriously considered suicide in 2022, with 16 percent of individuals actually attempting to take their life.<sup>9</sup> Instead of addressing these concerns, your administration has continued to demonize the LGBTQ+ community by falsely equating stories that uplift LGBTQI+ youth with child predation.

Similarly harmful impacts can be expected with the erasure of stories that discuss and tackle racism or explore the experiences of various communities of color or under-represented voices. For instance, the alarming dearth of Black voices and images in children’s literature has long been a publishing and academic blemish,<sup>10</sup> and your actions will only compound the educational adversity that these students of color already confront.

It is our firm belief that the banning of books because they contain LGBTQI+ content, or involve issues of race or ethnicity, is an explicit attempt to silence the stories of communities that already face an onslaught of legislative attacks, especially in Florida. As Governor, it is your responsibility to ensure Florida’s classrooms remain bastions of growth and inclusivity, rather than sanctuaries of division and hatred. Ultimately, it is crucial that you and your administration acknowledge the value of diverse stories in helping forge students who are welcoming and accepting of individuals regardless of their race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or other characteristics.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter.

Sincerely,

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2023/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/NSCS-2021-Full-Report.pdf>

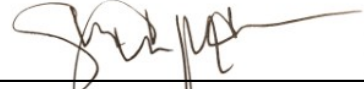
<sup>9</sup> <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/The-Trevor-Project-2022-National-Survey-on-LGBTQ-Youth-Mental-Health-by-State-Florida.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nber.org/papers/w29123>



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